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**CHAPTER**  
**MOTHERHOOD, DOMESTICITY AND NURTURE IN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC WORLD:**  
**NEGOTIATING FEMININITY IN *THE WALKING DEAD* (AMC, 2010-)**

Marta Suarez

*The Walking Dead* is a post-apocalyptic series that deals with the collapse of civilisation and its aftermath, following the spread of a virus that raises the dead and transforms them into predatory hunters of flesh. The narrative follows Rick Grimes, a deputy from a small town in Georgia. Having been in a coma during the outbreak, he wakes up to find walkers<sup>1</sup> roaming the streets. He joins some survivors, reunites with his family and eventually becomes the leader of the group (S1E3). It is during this initial reunion that we are introduced to the first of the female characters discussed in this chapter, Carol. The second, Maggie, is introduced at the start of the second season when Rick arrives at her father's farm (S2E2). The third character, Michonne, appears briefly at the end of S2, with a more extended introduction at the start of S3. The three are the longest-surviving female characters and are still alive at the time I am writing<sup>2</sup>. All three evolved from a pre-outbreak life connected to domestic spaces and distanced from acts of killing to a post-outbreak life as warriors and protectors of the group. Their portrayal differs from that of the three male protagonists introduced in the early seasons (Rick, Shane and Daryl), whose skills to kill evolve from their pre-outbreak occupations as deputies or hunters.

This chapter explores the characterisation of Carol, Maggie, and Michonne, in relation to nurturing, motherhood, and their involvement in domestic tasks, and will discuss how these elements connect them to (post)feminist goals. These characters evolve from a reductive representation of femininity based on gendered and racial stereotypes, toward a more complex characterisation where stereotypically feminine and masculine traits combine to construct richer and layered characters. At the start of their character journeys, each of them embodies a particular archetype of femininity that relates them to passivity and weakness (Carol), youthful sexual empowerment (Maggie) or the 'angry black woman' (Michonne). However, they all overcome these reductive representations within their particular arc, which leads them to positions of trust and power by challenging these stereotypes and transforming into new selves. These transformations are motivated by dramatic conflicts related to gendered ideas of motherhood, nurturing and their place in the domestic space. Yet by the end of season 8, these gendered categories have not been entirely discarded, only redefined. In doing so, these women who kill are able to embrace signifiers of 'mother' and 'nurturer'

alongside those of 'leader', 'fighter' or 'protector'. Additionally, their presence in domestic spaces is not in conflict with their public figures and instead of containing their femininity to domestic chores, these domestic spaces provide comfort and solace in hard times.

### **The Female Heroine and Motivations to Kill**

In this post-apocalyptic world, audiences are encouraged to accept the characters' potential need to kill walkers and humans in self-defence. Whereas killing humans is common for male action heroes, heroines who kill are often given a justification for their violent behaviour. Mary Jo Lodge concludes in her work that the 'protection of a child becomes an acceptable reason for a female action hero to emerge',<sup>3</sup> and Sherrie A. Innes affirms that in the rare occasion that an action hero has a child, 'her aggression is shown as only a manifestation of her desire to save him or her'.<sup>4</sup> Rikke Schubart distinguishes between the 'bad mother' or 'good mother'<sup>5</sup>: the first 'symbolizes the patriarchal family and raises her children in a self-sacrificing manner', while the second 'abandons her post' and follows 'her desire to do what men do'.<sup>6</sup> The two types confine action heroines within a patriarchal system in which they fight due to their maternal desire to protect the child. If their desire to fight falls outside this justification, or if the heroine does not revert to a patriarchal feminine role after winning the fight, she is usually punished through loss, violence or death. Revenge after men's betrayal<sup>7</sup> or sexual violence<sup>8</sup> are also motivators for a female action hero to emerge, argues Carol Clover. Even the figure of the Final Girl, who kills the villain and survives the narrative, is more victim than hero, Clover argues, because despite her heroic characteristics, she often survives thanks to some 'element of last-minute luck'<sup>9</sup>.

Another characteristic often associated with female action heroes is the presence of signifiers of masculinity. This has led some scholars to understand the figure within a binary coding of masculinity and femininity. For example, Hilary Neroni suggests that the female action hero adopts violence in a process of masculinisation in times of need, but that the narrative suggests that she will 'retreat back into her more feminine self'.<sup>10</sup> Other scholars, however, have emphasised a discourse of inclusion, whereby these masculine traits do not masculinise the character but make the heroine more complex by integrating both feminine and masculine traits. This argument recurs in the works of Charlene Tung<sup>11</sup>, Jeffrey Brown,<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Hills,<sup>13</sup> Jacinta Read<sup>14</sup>, Yvonne Tasker,<sup>15</sup> and Barbara Creed.<sup>16</sup>

### **Female Heroines in *The Walking Dead***

Although Carol, Maggie and Michonne evolve over the seasons, they all share characteristics of the bad mother at the start of their journeys. Carol initiates her character arc defined within the bad mother archetype because she has not protected her daughter from her husband or the walkers. Despite opportunities to become a mothering figure to other children (Lizzie, Mika, Sam and Henry), she imposes limitations on their bond and refuses to fully embrace the motherly role by preventing them from calling her 'mom'. Maggie embodies the 'bad mother' archetype by leading battles despite her pregnancy. Michonne is positioned in her origin story as the bad mother because she had left to gather supplies when her son died.

These characters' femininities are positioned continuously as sites of struggle in which they have to negotiate, embrace or transform ideas of motherhood, domesticity and nurture. By situating these characters in more traditional gendered roles, the series provides the audience with a background conforming to patriarchal roles, over which the justifications to kill are implemented afterwards. Each character's transformations connect with notions associated with both post-feminism and feminist theory. Carol embodies First- and Second-Wave feminism through a narrative arc that leads her to obtain voting rights as part of the council, addresses issues of domestic violence, and makes her become an equal to other members of the group, including the male lead. Maggie, however, embodies post-feminism by starting her character arc from a position of equality, where she voices her opinion and has control over her body and sexuality. Portrayed as in control and also as 'having it all', Maggie is associated with both leadership and motherhood. Michonne, however, cannot be defined in simple terms, since the intersectionality of gender and race complicate her arc. Her initial embodiment of the 'angry black woman' makes her a volatile outsider that must become more nurturing before she can join the group. Her arc emphasises her transformation into both a motherly figure and a romantic interest. Although these are not goals of white feminism, they can be correlated to black feminism, such as debunking the 'angry black woman' figure or the possibility of being a romantic interest without exoticising the black woman's body.

### **Carol: From Survivor to Warrior**

Carol's introduction is marked by invisibility. During the opening credits of S1E3, she appears in the background of a long shot in which Lori is cutting Carl's hair [5:07]. Often obscured in the sequence yet present throughout, Carol is barely visible in the top-right corner of the frame alongside her daughter, Sophia. Though she appears on screen several

times after that, it is not until almost fifteen minutes into the episode that Carol speaks for the first time, at the campfire [12:35]. The scene<sup>17</sup> sets up the power dynamics within Carol's family by portraying her as submissive and compliant, and her husband Ed as arrogant and domineering a characterisation emphasised later on in the episode when Ed hits her during an argument.<sup>18</sup> In this scene, the camerawork suggests notions of vulnerability through high angles that serve to conceal her partially or relegate her to the sides of the frame.<sup>19</sup> The tension and impact of the scene are heightened by the introduction of a non-diegetic score just before Ed hits Carol [40:41], increasing the volume as the scene develops. As Shane starts beating Ed in retaliation, Carol's cries are muffled, and her lines are inaudible. The sound of the beating directs the focus on the violence, while the visuals show her despair. She is then shown comforting Ed after the beating, when her apologetic lines are heard once again [41:48].

Although the roles of mother and wife are not exclusive to Carol at this point in the narrative, she is representative of a kind of femininity that is stereotyped as passive, accommodating, in need of protection and unskilled when it comes to weapons and defence. However, during the first season, most of the women in the group are defined by their relationships or contained within scenes linked to domestic tasks. Framing the female characters within these relationships and tasks is a portrayal that has attracted criticism regarding the representation of gender in *The Walking Dead*, as in works by Simpson,<sup>20</sup> or Baldwin and McCarthy.<sup>21</sup> However, it is worth noting that the serialisation of a narrative that had over six years' worth of comics at the time of filming, allows for long-term planning of character evolution, an argument also defended by Brown in relation to action heroines in serialised narratives.<sup>22</sup> Thus, although the critics of the first seasons are right in pointing out that the portrayals conform to gender stereotypes, it is also true that the latter are challenged from season 3 onwards.

Season 3 is also the season in which Carol undergoes a symbolic rebirth after managing to fight walkers all by herself. Unlike the comics (her character dies at this point), the TV show turns her into a female fighter in a move that is reminiscent of Barbara in the remake of *Night of the Living Dead*,<sup>23</sup> who 'not only survives' but also performs the 'unpleasant but necessary task(s)' that leads to that survival.<sup>24</sup> In the post-outbreak world, damsels in distress are a burden and are thus required to aid in their own rescue. Even though Carol's transformation

includes acquiring skills that are stereotypically masculine, her full character arc highlights the assumption of a more ‘adequate femininity’ that uses fighting skills for protective nurturing, thus aligning her with the ‘good mother’.

One of the events that significantly impacts Carol’s toughening up is Lizzie’s death. After a period of exile, Carol reunites with Tyreese, baby Judith, and the young sisters with whom Carol had developed a close bond, Lizzie and Mika (S4E10), [17:33]. Upon returning from getting supplies, Carol and Tyreese arrive to find that Lizzie has killed her sister (S4E14) [28:46]. Concluding that Judith is not safe around Lizzie, Carol takes Lizzie outside and asks her to look at the flowers before shooting her [36:11], echoing Mika’s words of comfort to Lizzie in a previous episode. In a reversal of stereotypical dynamics on screen, it is Tyreese who stays indoors with Judith and Carol the one taking Lizzie’s life. Furthermore, Tyreese is often seen carrying baby Judith or involved in basic childcare, with Carol taking the role of the fighter; for instance, when Carol rescues Rick’s group at Terminus (S5E1),<sup>25</sup> she assumes the role of a heroic leader, a role also granted by Rick when he asks her ‘Will you have us?’<sup>26</sup> Following Terminus’s rescue, Carol’s feminine behaviour becomes a conscious performance of non-threatening femininity. Upon arriving at Alexandria (S5E12), Carol suddenly acts as if she were not proficient with weapons, handling the guns awkwardly [09:35-09:54]. Whereas she rarely smiles in the previous season, at this point, she adopts an unguarded posture with arms to the side, a big grin and a soft voice. As part of her performance, Carol describes herself to the town mayor as a lucky housewife who was protected by the rest of the group in exchange for domestic tasks and some mothering; she even refers to her abusive husband as ‘that stupid wonderful man’.<sup>27</sup> Carol plays this double act between the arrival at Alexandria (S5E12) and the attack of the Wolves (S6E2), presenting herself to the new group as a harmless and innocuous housewife or, in her own words, as ‘invisible’ (S5E13, [12:06]. Some time after revealing to the community her fighting skills during the Wolves’ episode and Alexandria’s defence against walkers (S6E9), Carol shows a desire to merge the fighter and the nurturer, which is visually conveyed during the opening sequence of S6E12.<sup>28</sup> The editing shows Carol choosing ingredients, baking, killing a walker, choosing a patterned ‘housewife’ shirt and handing cookies to Alexandrians [2:10]. Combining signifiers associated with both the nurturer and the killer, an upbeat song links the scenes, suggesting a reconciliation of both roles, metaphorically represented by her ‘housewife’ outfit accessorised with her gun and her knife, clearly visible at the waist (Fig. 1).



*Figure 1. S6 E12. Not Tomorrow Yet. 00:02:10. Carol distributing cookies*

The balance between the two roles is short-lived, as a plan for a pre-emptive attack on the Saviors makes her question her role in the group, bringing feelings of guilt that are visually conveyed on a list count of those she has killed. Conversing with Tobin shortly afterwards, he deems her both maternal and scary,<sup>29</sup> linking her to what Barbara Creed describes as the monstrous-feminine and the terrible mother.<sup>30</sup> Recalling Laura Mulvey's remarks on the guilt of the female heroine,<sup>31</sup> Carol is guilty of having taken the phallic power and abandoned her mothering duties to the group. Since protecting loved ones involves killing, she resolves that the only solution lies<sup>32</sup> in a self-imposed exile that lasts a season.<sup>33</sup> Even when she re-joins the group, Carol is portrayed as taciturn; she avoids the children, and when she joins the battles, a sense of unpassionate duty to the group defines her actions. It is not until she rescues Henry that her emotions return, in a scene of healing that closes her character arc, as we shall see.

The invisibility that the pre-outbreak world imposed has now become a choice that allows Carol to mask her fighting skills. The difference between Carol's two roles is emphasised by the costumes: comfortable loose clothing in dark earth-colours when representing the 'killer'; light-coloured cardigans and flowered patterns when portraying the 'housewife'. The use of flowers is a recurring theme linked to Carol's mothering and nurturing nature, but also one that evokes grief. The first instance in which Carol is connected to the image of the flower is during S2E4, when Daryl gives her a Cherokee rose and explains its meaning of hope,

through a legend about Native American Mothers who lost their children during the Trail of Tears.<sup>34</sup> Blending meanings of nurture and grief, flowers as a visual motif outline her arc: Carol destroys the field of blossoming roses upon finding Sofia dead;<sup>35</sup> she refers to flowers when killing Lizzie; she is framed within flowered patterns when Morgan tries to convince her to rejoin the fight;<sup>36</sup> a flower graffiti is next to her during the opening battle of S8E1; and The Kingdom's citizens she co-leads are given a small bunch of flowers before combat, where all but her and two other characters die. The flowers serve as a reminder of the signifiers of grieving motherhood that Daryl's Cherokee rose evoked, those that Carol has to embrace as part of the resolution for her character arc, which involves forgiving herself for Sophia's death. This redemption does not take place until Season 8 when she saves Henry, a child of a similar age,<sup>37</sup> who was also lost alone in the woods. Finding Henry under the tree roots<sup>38</sup> that recall Sophia's disappearance,<sup>39</sup> Carol sobs and apologises to Henry. Her narrative arc and the editing connect both sequences with the meanings of motherhood, grief, healing and hope that the flowers symbolised. Using her skills as a fighter to track and save Henry realigns Carol with a more conforming femininity – that of the protective mother – yet it does not detract from her identity as a fighter or relegate her back to domestic space.

### **Maggie: From Having-it-All to Pregnant Widow**

Maggie is introduced in S2E2.<sup>40</sup> As Rick carries an injured Carl towards her farm, Maggie appears, a figure on a porch, in the blurry background of a medium long shot of Rick [4:40]. The editing alternates between a POV-shot of Rick from Maggie's perspective before her face is revealed, thus aligning the audience with Maggie's gaze. While the POV shot can suggest a threat, its combination with medium close-ups allows the audience to infer that she is a young woman, alone in clear sight, with no visible weapons [4:53]. After she alerts them, her family walks out of the house just as Rick arrives. Her posture is non-threatening, while the composition, which abides by the rule of thirds, makes her the centre of attention, highlights her place in the family and announces her importance in the narrative [5:20]. Introducing both Carol and Maggie from a distance underscores their non-threatening position in space. At the same time, by presenting their characters within a family, the composition articulates the power dynamics in the private space. Maggie is defined from the start as an independent young woman who appears equal to her father. By positioning her on the porch in the front line with her father, yet not physically connected to him, the framing asserts these qualities, which become more evident as the episode unfolds.



Maggie is rarely involved in cooking or childcare, but rather, in gardening and farming activities. Planting crops and discussions of land fertility suggest notions of reproduction, which are embodied in her later pregnancy. She is soon introduced as the initiator of sex (S2E4, [29:21]) and shown in control of her sexuality, notions that connect her to ‘do-me feminism’.<sup>41</sup> The character is thus representative of post-feminist discourses on femininity and sexuality, where empowerment is connected to choice and agency in sexual encounters. She is thus initially portrayed in accordance with contemporary representations of the female action hero; her primary value is her ‘irresistible sexuality’ despite being as ‘tough as the guys’,<sup>42</sup> blending ‘sexuality with assertiveness’ with ‘tough-girl strength, allowing her to transcend the patriarchal limits of female identity/femininity’.<sup>43</sup> By the end of season 2, her sexual encounters evolve into a romantic relationship with Glenn, who finally tells her he loves her (S2E13, [20:15]). From this point forward, their arcs often involve forced separation and the strong desire to return to each other.

Her fertile sexuality is threatened via plots of rape (S3E7, [29:25]) and of endangered pregnancy (S6E15, [40:54]). By doing so, the viewer is reminded of the feminine fragility of her sexual body. After Maggie and Glenn are rescued following the Governor’s sexual violence, Glenn takes on the role of Maggie’s protector. This is furthered when Glenn takes a picture of a sleeping Maggie (Fig. 2) (S4E2),<sup>44</sup> which he cherishes. During a forced separation (S4E8) and until they reunite (S4E15),<sup>45</sup> Glenn finds comfort with this picture. Her body, once more, is the object of the gaze, connecting it to notions of scopophilia<sup>46</sup> on two levels, that of the narrative and that of the audience. Maggie destroys the picture as soon as they reunite,<sup>47</sup> reclaiming her right to be in control of how and when her body is looked at.



Figure 2. S4 E2. *Infected*. 00:08:15. Soft side and relationship with Glenn

Protecting Maggie's body is a central concern of season 6, this time to protect her pregnancy, which is directly threatened on two occasions: first when a prisoner in a Savivors' outpost (S6E12), and later when she becomes critically ill due to *placenta praevia* (S6E16). The sudden awareness that something is wrong takes place after Maggie decides to cut her long hair (a visible feminine trait) to go to war.<sup>48</sup> The efforts of the group to take her to a nearby doctor lead to their capture by the Savivors and the subsequent murder of Glenn by Negan.<sup>49</sup> After their release, and although Maggie's pregnancy is still in jeopardy, compositions do not suggest weakness but intense pain. With low angles and central framing, her suffering is emphasised and contrasted to the group's sorrow. Sobbing, Maggie is seen standing up with effort, yet refusing anyone's help. As the group carries away the dead bodies, connotations of isolation and pain are suggested by a high-angle establishing shot of her alone in the empty field, next to the spilt blood. (S7E13, [43:31]).

The characterisation of Maggie as a strong woman is further stressed in S7E5,<sup>50</sup> in which she becomes the de-facto leader of The Hilltop. Still recovering, Maggie wakes up in the middle of the night to a Savivors' attack. Climbing on top of her caravan to see what is happening, she organises the defence. The long-angle, combined with low-key lighting, emphasises her power and authority (S7E5, [17:41]). A similar framing takes place when she addresses the

whole community at the end of Season 7 and the start of Season 8, in speeches that takes them all to war<sup>51</sup> and that identify her as the chosen leader at the Hilltop.

The desire for revenge after her husband's death underlies her arc in subsequent seasons and comes to the fore at the end of Season 8. At this point, Maggie is known as 'the widow', a nickname that associates her identity with her husband's death and her thirst for revenge. At the end of the season and in a scene reminiscent of *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972),<sup>52</sup> Maggie sits behind a desk in low-key lighting demanding revenge on Negan, Rick and Michonne. In doing so, she reinforces not only her position as leader of the Hilltop but embraces her role as antagonist. It will be interesting to see whether Season 9 will allow her to reach full leadership of both groups without jeopardising her motherhood, or whether her desire to continue the fight will once again be punished by death.

Maggie thus starts out as a confident and independent postfeminist character who is soon involved in a normative relationship with goals of marriage, parental approval and reproduction. These heteronormative goals conform to hegemonic ideas of femininity. Yet when Maggie chooses actions linked to hegemonic masculinity, such as wilfully attacking another community or dethroning the leader of the Hilltop, the narrative punishes her with a loved one's death. Throughout the seasons, her narrative on *The Walking Dead* tends to reward actions that lead to family pursuits; for instance, when Maggie decides to stay behind because of her pregnancy instead of looking for Glenn, he reappears even though he was believed to be dead (S6E7). Yet the narrative punishes fighting actions that could have been prevented and are not carried out in the name of the family. Attacking Woodbury brings retaliation that ends with the death of her father; joining a trip to Washington instead of looking for her sister ultimately leads her to Beth's dead body; and her decision to attack the Saviors leads to her husband's death. The trope of the guilty woman is here linked to her feminine transgressions, which pursue masculine pursuits instead of conforming to feminine ones, pursuits that must be either controlled or disciplined, thereby linking her character to Shubart's 'bad mother'. Yet despite all these deaths, Maggie stands as a proud leader of her community and derives strength from her anger, still balancing the notions of motherhood and leadership, which are visually symbolised when at her office desk she holds her bump protectively whilst looking at baby Gracie (S8E11, [16:41]).

### **Michonne: From Lonely Angry Warrior to Partner and Mother**

The character of Michonne cannot be reduced to (post-)feminist goals but begs for an intersectional analysis that takes into account race and gender. Second-wave feminism has often been criticised for its tendency to speak for ‘all women’ when in reality it has focused on the needs and equality goals of Western white middle-class women<sup>53</sup>. Post-feminist theory, asserts Kimberly Springer, highlights the absence of women of colour in influential positions, but generally fails to interrogate white privilege and the importance of race.<sup>54</sup> In fact, post-feminism commodifies race by making it consumable through ethnic fashion and bodily characteristics.<sup>55</sup>

Although Michonne’s appearance evokes some ethnic elements, more significant is her initial portrayal as the ‘angry black woman’ archetype. Unlike Carol and Maggie, Michonne is not introduced from a distance in a non-threatening position, but abruptly and in an aggressive context.<sup>56</sup> She is revealed first through her katana, and thus her capacity to castrate. As a walker is beheaded while approaching a defenceless Andrea, its body drops off-screen, revealing a mysterious figure with a chained walker to each side; Michonne’s face is concealed under a hood and her body is wrapped in darkness (Fig. 3) (S2E13, [37:47]). By introducing her character through violence and delaying the revelation of her face, her character is associated with danger and menace.



*Figure 3. S2 E13. Beside the Dying Fire. 00:37:47. Michonne's Introduction*

Unlike Carol and Maggie, then, Michonne appears for the first time in a narrative cliff-hanger at the end of a season. Pointedly, her face is not revealed until S3E1, where we encounter her via a back close-up that emphasises her dreadlocks, before seeing her features.<sup>57</sup> Though no longer anonymous, her face expresses anger, an element that characterises her throughout most of season 3. Introduced as the angry outsider, Michonne's character arc connects to notions of opening up, being accepted in the group, and toning down by acquiring traditional feminine traits related to (surrogate) mothering. If Maggie and Carol were required to harden up before taking on leadership positions, Michonne's journey requires her to become more nurturing. Her character arc starts with stereotypes that align the black heroine with the 'angry black woman'<sup>58</sup> lacking 'lady-like femininity'.<sup>59</sup> Her transformation, which implies a sort of softening, has been discussed by Caroline Brown in relation to Michelle Obama, who placated criticism on her aggressive 'unfemininity' through the use of fashion and an emphasis on her role as a mother.<sup>60</sup> As with sexism, racial stereotypes and tokenism populate the first seasons of *The Walking Dead*, despite the in-narrative claims of a post-racial world.<sup>61</sup> Characterised as fierce and distant upon meeting the group,<sup>62</sup> she is told she must leave once she has recovered from her injuries. Whereas the comics link her mistrust, anger and isolation to the trauma of having been tortured and raped, the TV series does not explain this behaviour other than as a protection mechanism for survival. Her portrayal thus conjures up images of the Sapphire and the Crazy Black Bitch<sup>63</sup> through a reckless and violent attitude. Patricia Hill Collins asserts that negative stereotypes are 'designed to control assertive Black female behavior', and that 'aggressive Afro American women are threatening because they challenge white patriarchal definitions of femininity'.<sup>64</sup> The solution, Collins argues, is not to change 'their behaviour to become meek, docile, and stereotypically 'feminine'',<sup>65</sup> but to value this assertiveness to transcend and control this 'externally-defined controlling images'.<sup>66</sup> Michonne's transformation and acceptance in the group are affected through her alignment with the roles of mother and wife. Yet this status does not affect her swordfighting skills, intuition or bravery; instead, she uses these skills to protect her new family unit without compromising her assertiveness and independent thought.

Michonne is accepted in the group after bonding with Carl in a mission to collect a family picture for him and a cot for his baby sister, both family-related objects (S3E12). For Michonne, gaining trust is associated with nurture and protection. This turn is not a radical change, but a rediscovery of her mothering-self, a journey that becomes apparent when

Michonne softly sobs and cuddles Judith when they are alone (S4E2).<sup>67</sup> Cradling the baby is not only embracing her mothering nature, but also the group and her role in it. Nurturing aspects of her personality are also revealed through a dream sequence that depicts fragments of her family before the outbreak<sup>68</sup> and where her hardening, like Carol's, is connected to a failure to protect her child. Shortly after this dream, Michonne turns around and joins Rick and Carl.<sup>69</sup> For a brief period, Michonne expresses a desire to settle down and stop fighting, her goals thus conforming to the 'new traditionalism',<sup>70</sup> which 'articulates a vision of the home as women's sanctuary from the stresses of their working lives'.<sup>71</sup> Yet it will become apparent that she cannot put down her weapons even in apparent periods of peace, after the sword that she had hung on the wall<sup>72</sup> is used to kill the Major's husband. Subsequently, Michonne comes to terms with the fact that her desire for a peaceful home requires her to defend it, thus carrying the sword once again and removing it permanently from the wall.

Michonne's position as mother in Rick's family unit becomes complete in S6E10. First, Carl tells Michonne that he would stop her from reanimating out of love, as he did for his mother. Later that night, Rick and Michonne watch Judith on the baby monitor. As their fingers touch, they hold hands and smile before sharing their first kiss (S6E10, [41:51]). The full sequence<sup>73</sup> focuses on romantic elements but leaves the sexual act in ellipsis, cutting to Michonne and Rick sleeping naked in bed. Their bodies occupy the centre of the composition, their legs intertwined, and their weapons at each side. With a balanced composition, the framing suggests that these characters have acquired wholeness via each other. The way Michonne is portrayed in this sequence breaks with common portrayals of black female sexuality after Blaxploitation cinema, where the black female character is either exoticised sexually or coded as masculine and de-sexualised,<sup>74</sup> with narratives suggesting that the black heroine 'does not fall in love'<sup>75</sup> or where she is 'depicted as sexual predator(s)'.<sup>76</sup> Instead, this sequence makes Michonne the object of love, and not just desire, first framing her in a domestic setting, then focusing on romantic elements, and finally skipping the sexual encounter in favour of gentle intimacy.

The more Michonne's relationship with Rick evolves, the less she is involved in fight scenes. This could be understood as a negative representation of a female character who submits to traditional femininity; from an intersectional perspective, however, her characterisation as a skilful motherly fighter, as well as a romantic interest who is not objectified, break negative stereotyping and constitutes positive representation.<sup>77</sup> Feminisation takes place through her

mothering relationship with Carl and her romantic relationship with Rick. This relationship empowers her by allowing her influence over the male lead. Instead of weakening her as a warrior, Michonne acquires a more domestic and nurturing role without detriment to her warrior skills. By Season 8, Michonne has attained the post-feminist ideal of ‘having it all’ by debunking the ‘angry black woman’ and ‘loveless black heroine’ tropes. In so doing, her character counters the lack of ‘multi-faceted roles routinely available to black women in American films with which to counterbalance their “sexual” images’.<sup>78</sup>

## **Conclusion**

If the arcs of Carol, Maggie and Michonne follow different paths, all acquire survival, fighting and leadership skills, which characterise them as female warriors. However, each of them is marked distinctly in connection to notions of femininity, domesticity and motherhood. Carol’s initial mothering role is perceived as inadequate because she cannot protect her child in this world, so that her journey also involves mastering the warrior skills that will allow her to protect those she loves. Maggie’s femininity is associated with her fertile sexuality, and her journey aims toward leadership and family. While she is still pregnant by the end of season 8, the narrative has constructed a strong leader that has in mind the protection of those under her guardianship, including her child. Michonne’s femininity is initially contained, in line with stereotypical representations of non-sexual black female characters. As she engages in a romantic relationship with the main lead, her portrayal avoids exoticising or sexualising her body, the narration focusing instead on romantic gestures evoking tenderness and closeness. If the start of the show associated these female characters with stereotypical traits, their evolution as resourceful, authoritative and skilled is essential in a genre where women warriors often follow narratives of the Final Girl, the dangerous bombshell, or the crazed avenger. Instead, these representations offer portrayals based on developing skills, becoming protectors of the group, and gaining positions of trust and power within it. In doing so, the series challenges patriarchal notions of femininity and offers alternatives to hegemonic discourses. Overall, and despite character arcs linked to motherhood and guilt, the series moves beyond the initial gender stereotypes to create rich and complex action heroines that combine both masculine and feminine traits, moving away from the ‘figurative male’ and approaching Hills’s notion of transformation and becoming.<sup>79</sup> Their embodiment of different feminist goals creates a multifaceted universe that asserts their individuality and gives them narrative arcs that do not confine them to the realms of the mother and wife, even though they embrace these roles at some point during the narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the raised undead as 'walkers' in line with the series, which makes a point of not using the word 'zombies'.

<sup>2</sup> Season 8.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Jo Lodge 'Knocked Up, Not Knocked Out' in DeTora, L.M. (ed) *Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture: Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home* (North Carolina, 2009), p.230

<sup>4</sup> Sherry A. Inness, 'Boxing Gloves and Bustiers' in Innes, S.A. (ed) *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (New York, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes. The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006* (Jefferson, 2007), pp. 169-245

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.p. 181

<sup>7</sup> Carol J Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton Classics) (Princeton, 2015). Kindle Edition, p. 29

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 144

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. x

<sup>10</sup> Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (New York, 2005), pp. 84-86

<sup>11</sup> Charlene Tung, 'Embodying and image: Gender, Race, and Sexuality in La Femme Nikita' in Inness, A.S. (ed), *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (New York, 2004), pp. 103-106

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey A. Brown, *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (Mississippi, 2015)

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Hills, 'From 'figurative males' to action heroines: further thoughts on active women in the cinema' *Screen* 40/1 (1999) p.40

<sup>14</sup> Jacinta Read, '"Once Upon a Time There Were Three Little Girls...": Girls, Violence, and Charlie's Angels.' in Schneider, S. J. (ed) *New Hollywood Violence* (Manchester, 2004), p. 205

<sup>15</sup> Yvonne Tasker, 'Action Heroines in the 1980s: The Limits of Masculinity' in Turner, G. (ed) *The Film Cultures Reader* (London, 1993), pp. 308-310

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Creed, 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine. An Imaginary Abjection' in Grant, B.K. (ed.) *The Dread of Difference. Gender and the Horror Film* (Texas, 2015)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 00:11:30 – 00:12:52

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 00:36:39 – 00:41:48

<sup>19</sup> *Tell It to the Frogs*, 00:40:15 – 00:40:53

<sup>20</sup> Philip L. Simpson, 'The Zombie Apocalypse is Upon Us! : Homeland Insecurity.' in Keetley, D. 'We're All Infected': *Essays on AMC's The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human* (Contributions to Zombie Studies), (North Carolina, 2014) Kindle edition, Loc. 719.

For similar conclusions in relation to differences in gender roles related to either the TV show or the Comic series, see Murray (2013), Garland et al. (2016) and Gencarella (2016). Whilst Vinney and Wiley-Rapoport (2016) do comment on this division, they also discuss gender transgressions

<sup>21</sup> Martina Baldwin and Mark McCarthy 'Same as It Ever Was: Savior Narratives and the Logics of Survival in The Walking Dead.' in Balaji, M (ed.) *Thinking Dead: What the Zombie Apocalypse Means* (Plymouth, 2013), p. 86

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey A. Brown, 'Gender, Sexuality and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books' in Innes, S.A. (ed) *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (New York, 2004), pp. 70-71

- <sup>23</sup> George Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (1990)
- <sup>24</sup> Grant, Barry Keith 'Taking Back the Night of the Living Dead: George Romero, Feminism, and the Horror Film' in Grant, B.K. (ed.) *The Dread of Difference. Gender and the Horror Film* (Texas, 2015), pp. 231-234
- <sup>25</sup> Season 5, episode 1, *No Sanctuary*, 00:13:34
- <sup>26</sup> Season 5, episode 2, *Strangers*, 00:05:25
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 00:27:23 – 00:28:09
- <sup>28</sup> Season 6, episode 12, *Not Tomorrow Yet*, 00:00:00 – 00:03:01
- <sup>29</sup> *Not Tomorrow Yet*, 00:11:36 – 00:13:34 '(Tobin:) Worried about tomorrow. (Carol:) You going? (Tobin:) No, you are... You can do things that... that just terrify me. (Carol:) How do you think I do those things? (Tobin:) You're a mom. (Carol:) I was. (Tobin:) You are. It... It... It's not the cookies or the smiles. It's... it's the hard stuff. The scary stuff. It's how you can do it. It's strength. You're a mom to most of the people here. (Carol:) To you too? (Tobin:) No. You are something else to me. (Carol:) Well, it's not tomorrow yet.'
- <sup>30</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*
- <sup>31</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in Braudy, L. and Cohen, M. (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York, 1975)
- <sup>32</sup> Season 6, episode 14, *Twice as Far*, 00:40:13 – 00:41:45
- 'I wish it didn't have to end, not this way. It was never my intention to hurt you, but it's how it has to be. We have so much here... people, food, medicines, walls, everything we need to live. But what we have, other people want, too, and that will never change. If we survive this threat and it's not over, another one will be back to take its place, to take what we have. I love you all here. I do. And I'd have to kill for you. And I can't. I won't. Rick sent me away and I wasn't ever gonna come back, but everything happened and I wound up staying. But I can't anymore. I can't love anyone because I can't kill for anyone. So I'm going, like I always should have. Don't come after me, please.'
- <sup>33</sup> Season 7, episode 13, *Bury me here*, 00:44:55
- <sup>34</sup> Season 2, episode 4, *Cherokee Rose*, 00:34:36 – 00:36:50
- <sup>35</sup> Season 2, episode 8, *Nebraska*, 00:14:19 – 00:14:49
- <sup>36</sup> Season 7, episode 8, *Heart Still Beating*, 00:20:46 – 00:23:06
- <sup>37</sup> The actor is also the real-life brother of the actor who plays Sophia
- <sup>38</sup> Same shooting location, different locations in the narrative
- <sup>39</sup> Season 8, episode 14, *Still Gotta Mean Something*, 00:40:24 – 00:41:47
- <sup>40</sup> Season 2, episode 2, *Bloodletting*, 00:04:33 – 00:05:33
- <sup>41</sup> Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh, 2009), pp. 90-92
- <sup>42</sup> Brown, *Beyond Bombshells*
- <sup>43</sup> Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, p. 150
- <sup>44</sup> Season 4, episode 2, *Infected*, 00:07:51
- <sup>45</sup> Season 4, episode 15, *Us*, 00:32:18
- <sup>46</sup> Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*
- <sup>47</sup> *Us*, 00:37:10.
- <sup>48</sup> Season 6, episode 15, *East*, 00:41:17.
- <sup>49</sup> From Season 6, episode 16, *Last Day on Earth*, 00:52:23 until Season 7, episode 1, *The Day Will Come when You Won't Be*, 00:20:07.
- <sup>50</sup> Season 7, episode 5, *Go Getters*, 00:15:58 – 00:19:38.
- <sup>51</sup> Season 7, episode 16, *The First Day of the Rest of Your Life*, 00:58:55 – 00:59:22 and more clearly in Season 8, episode 1, *Mercy*, 00:04:31 – 00:05:12.
- <sup>52</sup> Season 8, episode 16, *Wrath*, 00:41:12 – 00:42:37.
- <sup>53</sup> Benita Roth, *Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 2.
- <sup>54</sup> Kimberly Springer, 'Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women. African-American Women in Postfeminist and Post-Civil Rights Popular Culture' in Charlotte Brunsdon and Lynn Spigel, *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (Maidehean, 2008), p. 72.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 74.
- <sup>56</sup> Season 2, episode 13, *The Dying Fire*, 00:36:54 – 00:37:49.
- <sup>57</sup> Season 3, episode 1, *Seed*, 00:30:00 – 00:33:27.
- <sup>58</sup> J. Celeste Walley-Jean, 'Debunking the Myth of the 'Angry Black Woman': An Exploration of Anger in Young African American Women' *Black Women, Gender & Families* 3/2 (2009) pp. 66-86.

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- <sup>59</sup> Kimberley Springer, 'Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women'.
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- <sup>62</sup> Season 3, episode 6, *Hounded*, 00:41:47 – 00:42:25.
- <sup>63</sup> Reynolds-Dobbs, Wendy, Kecia M. Thomas, and Matthew S. Harrison 'From Mammy to Superwoman. Images that Hinder Black Women's Career Development, *Journal of Career Development* (2008), p. 136.
- <sup>64</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought', *Social Problems*. 33/6 (1986), p. S17.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. S18.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> *Infected*, 00:32:23 – 00:33:58.
- <sup>68</sup> Season 4, episode 9, *After*, 00:13:30 – 00:16:08.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., 00:31:49 – 00:34:14.
- <sup>70</sup> Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, pp. 51-53.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 52.
- <sup>72</sup> *Forget*, 00:39:41 – 00:40:14.
- <sup>73</sup> Season 6, episode 10, *The Next World*, 00:38:20 – 00:42:09.
- <sup>74</sup> Norma Manatu. *African American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema*. (Jefferson, 2002), p. 44.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid. p. 11.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 66.
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- <sup>78</sup> Manatu, *African American Women*, p. 43.
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